The Arctic: Canadian security and defence

AS ONE OF CANADA'S FRONTIERS, THE ARCTIC HAS for many years had a high profile in the country's defence and security. The specific nature of its role, however, has fluctuated with Canada's overall security requirements. For instance, while the 1971 Defence White Paper emphasized sovereignty in the Arctic, the 1987 White Paper emphasized Canada's defence capabilities there. More recently, the effects of climate change have served to add another dimension to an already complex policy area, and once again the challenge for Canada is to adapt its Arctic security and defence strategy to meet changing threats.

The apex of the Arctic's defence role: the Cold War era

Although the militarization of the Arctic was initiated during the Second World War, the role that the region came to play in Canada's security was defined largely by the Cold War, Canada's membership in the NATO alliance and the country's continental defence alliance with the United States. The value of the Arctic in security and defence significantly appreciated as the Cold War and the struggle between West and East played out. While Europe was considered the primary theatre for any potential armed conflict, the technological advances of air- and seaborne weapons systems were such that geographic distance no longer afforded effective security for Canada and North America. In this respect, the Arctic was recognized as the continent's most vulnerable point, since the shortest and therefore most likely route to be taken by any Soviet attack on North America was through the Arctic.

The Arctic's role was also affected by an evolution in strategic thinking and the embrace of deterrence by both sides in the Cold War. In particular, although the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles in the 1960s and 1970s significantly diminished the Arctic's importance in defence, Canada and the continent remained vulnerable to attack, given that the Arctic and its surrounding waters could potentially provide launch sites for a mobile, and therefore unpredictable, Soviet submarine offensive.

It followed from these developments and the impact of the Cold War on the Arctic that, the severe climate notwithstanding, the region became important to Canada's defence and the country's contribution to its alliance commitments. At the same time, given the perception that the Arctic had little intrinsic value, the region's worth was assessed on the basis of its utility in protecting Canada and the continent.

Thus the Arctic, perceived as a remote, vast, neglected land, was militarized and its landscape significantly altered as a result of Canada's efforts to enforce its authority over the region and to allow it to serve the country's security and defence needs.[1] Communications and transportation infrastructures were built on those already in place from the Second World War, particularly roads, airfields and airbases, telephone systems, and radio and radar sites, all of which had primarily defence purposes. But, also in the early part of the Cold War, Canadian military bases were established across the North, including in Churchill and Frobisher Bay (now Iqaluit). Moreover, in 1947 the Canadian Rangers patrol group was established as a force of part-time reservists drawn from local Inuit and other northern Aboriginal populations to provide a military presence across the North that other components of the Canadian Forces would have had difficulty exercising.[2] With a climate similar to that of Siberia and parts of northern Europe, Canada's North also became an important site for numerous Canadian and allied military and air force training exercises, including weapons testing. Efforts were also made to improve Canada's strategic capabilities in monitoring and patrolling the Arctic, including the 1985 announcement to construct a new Polar Class 8 icebreaker.[3]

These efforts followed on various assertions during the Cold War about Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic and thus its right and requirement to defend the region. During this period, some Inuit communi-

ties were relocated; it has been suggested that this was done to populate remote areas and thereby reinforce Canada's authority in the region and decrease vulnerability to encroachments on its sovereignty.[4] Meanwhile, the patrol of Arctic waters by Coast Guard icebreakers and, during favourable seasons, by navy vessels, helped to safeguard Canadian interests.

Because a sound defence of Canada was intimately connected with the protection of North America, these unilateral defence measures were significantly supplemented with binational efforts with the United States. One of these arrangements was the 1957 Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, a string of radar stations stretching across the upper edge of the North American land mass, including Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories, Baffin Island and Greenland. In 1985 the system was reconfigured and renamed the North Warning System. The North American Air Defence Command (NORAD), established in 1958, was the key binational arrangement between Canada and the United States. Renamed the North American Aerospace Defence Command in 1981, NORAD's mandate has been to monitor the airspace – and, later, aerospace – above North America, including the Arctic region, and to provide warning and possible response to irregular and militarily threatening activities, including an attack by aircraft, missiles or space-based systems.

The militarization of the Canadian North paralleled the experience of other northern NATO allies such as Norway (the only NATO ally to share a border with the Soviet Union); Denmark, particularly where Greenland is concerned; and Iceland, which in view of its lack of a military force not only joined NATO but also entered into a defence relationship with the United States. At the same time, these activities were significantly overshadowed by the militarization of the northern regions of the Soviet Union and the United States. For the Soviet Union, the Kola Peninsula was home not only to its Northern Fleet (which was second in size only to the United States Pacific Fleet and included its most powerful ballistic missile submarine forces) but also to a sizable concentration of air and ground offensive capabilities. Indeed, because of geography, the Soviet Union and present-day Russia have had the largest permanently stationed forces in the Arctic. The United States saw Europe as the primary theatre and the Arctic largely as "the Northern Flank." Thus, while the US military presence in Alaska – in the form of the National Guard as well as the armed services (land, air and naval forces) – was important, it played only a secondary role, despite the proximity of the Soviet Union.

The changing security landscape: the post-Cold War era

The end of the Cold War and the threat of a military confrontation with the Soviet Union initially served to diminish the Arctic's role in Canadian and continental security and defence. However, if security itself is defined as the absence of threats to values and needs, then threats to Canada's security did not disappear, but rather were merely transformed. Indeed, as much as the Arctic's significance was informed during the Cold War by Canada's security concerns at the time, so has the Arctic's security and defence profile been reconfigured in light of new and emerging threats and priorities.

Environmental security. From an environmental standpoint, the Arctic has become increasingly vulnerable. Threats in this regard were certainly evident during the Cold War in the form of marine and air pollution, and Canadian authorities sought to protect the environment by means of various pieces of legislation, including the 1970 *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act*, and through related programs.[5] The full range of military activities, from flight training that disrupted animal migration patterns to the construction of military stations and radar sites, has also had an environmental impact. Moreover, such sites, having been largely deemed surplus and therefore abandoned, have been allowed to deteriorate, leaving chemical and other waste that has penetrated the ground and affected the health of all forms of life. There have also been concerns about the extent to which nuclear fallout resulting from the military activities of the Soviet fleet in the Arctic has damaged the fragile ecosystem of the region.

In addition to these factors, climate change is also threatening the Arctic environment, as the thawing of permafrost and the transformation of sea ice into open water disrupts ecosystems and increases the vulnerability of the human and animal life dependent

on them. Climate change is also raising the spectre of the environmental degradation that could result from activities related to the exploitation of previously inaccessible natural resources. Further, risks of ecological imbalance and marine pollution accompany the possible increase in shipping through the Arctic waters and the Northwest Passage that may soon be enabled by climate change.

Increased illegal access and illegal activities, including terrorism. As the Arctic generally becomes more accessible because of the warming climate, some analysts predict the emergence of new security threats.[6] One such risk is that of an increase in illegal migration and trafficking in persons to North America through the Arctic. There are also fears of the North being used as a thoroughfare for drug trafficking as well as a destination for illegal narcotics. In the post-September 11 era, fears have been raised concerning the increased vulnerability of the Arctic as a passage for terrorists, whether for illegal entry into North America or for the transport of illegal weapons, including biological and chemical devices. To such a list of activities, generally perpetrated by organized crime groups, can be added the rise of other types of organized crime, such as those involving industries engaged in the extraction of lucrative resources, such as diamonds and copper.

Violations of Canadian Arctic sovereignty. Traditional concerns relating to the violation of Canada's sovereignty and other legal claims where the Arctic is concerned remain an important element of Canada's security priorities. In this respect several issues are particularly relevant: unauthorized access through the Northwest Passage, which Canada considers as internal waters, and not as an international strait; Canada's claim to Hans Island in the Nares Strait (between Greenland and Ellesmere Island), contrary to Denmark's claim; the dispute with the United States over the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea; and possible conflicting claims over the extension of the continental shelf among the Arctic states. The latter two issues are associated with the potential for lucrative natural resource extraction rights. The net effect of these issues is a level of vulnerability in the Arctic to unauthorized and undetected activities on the part of other states, which may serve to undermine Canadian authority and sovereignty in the region.

In defence of the North

Canada's appreciation of the foregoing concerns about security in the Arctic and their significance for Canadian interests domestically and internationally has not been in doubt. But the nature and timing of various policy initiatives and funding announcements that attempt to strengthen Canadian security in the Arctic suggest a degree of dissatisfaction on the part of the government with the status quo.[7] Moreover, they reveal a sense of urgency. Indeed, while these policy initiatives and funding announcements may be intended to address a range of concerns, in the end they share a common aim to strengthen Canada's visibility in the North, which is considered not only a means of projecting Canadian authority and sovereignty, but also, ultimately, the best defence against threats to Canadian values and interests.

A prominent element of these policy initiatives and funding announcements, particularly those included in the 2005 *International Policy Statement*, in several policy announcements made in 2006 and 2007, in the 2007 Speech from the Throne, and in the May 2008 Canada First Defence Strategy has been the enhancement in the Arctic of the strategic capabilities of Canada's three military services, especially with respect to surveillance, patrol and communications.[8] Improving the Canadian Forces' strategic capability is also front and centre in numerous military exercises undertaken in the North. Many of these exercises are intended to enhance the Forces' ability to deploy and operate year-round in extreme weather conditions, across the three services, and in response to various exigencies, particularly regarding surveillance and patrol.[9] Improving strategic capability is also at the heart of the 2007 announcement of a decision to construct six to eight Polar Class patrol ships capable of sustained operations in ice up to one metre thick, thereby prolonging their surveillance season by enabling the patrol of the Northwest Passage in the summer and of approaches to the Northwest Passage at other times of the year. It is also prominent in the decision to establish a Canadian Forces Arctic Training Centre in Resolute Bay whose equipment would be made available to support regional military or civilian emergency

operations to increase capabilities and quicken response times. Finally, enhancing Canada's strategic capabilities in the Arctic is a significant element in the announcement to establish a military and civilian deepwater port at a pre-existing dock in the far North just inside the eastern entrance to the Northwest Passage on Baffin Island. Such a capability is intended to allow patrol ships that carry out marine surveillance operations in the Arctic to resupply and refuel, and generally to extend the operational range of the navy in the Arctic.

The 2006 announcement that the Canadian Rangers would be revitalized is another component of recent initiatives intended to strengthen Canada's strategic capabilities in the North. The intention is to add 900 members to the Canadian Rangers for a total of 5,000 and to ensure that the Rangers are equipped to conduct more frequent, larger and more effective patrols of the extended coastlines, across the Arctic and in the interior north of 50 degrees latitude.

This was followed by the September 2008 announcement to establish a new Army Reserve unit in Yellowknife[10] and to expand the Junior Canadian Rangers program.[11]

While the Canadian Forces may take the lead with respect to asserting a stronger Canadian presence in the north, other Canadian government departments and agencies also have a vital role to play either independently or collaboratively. For instance, RCMP activities in the North aimed at enhancing public security and addressing law-and-order issues, as well as the work of the Coast Guard regarding surveillance of maritime incursions, are particularly prominent. Indeed, the Arctic Security Interdepartmental Working Group was designed to forge a more comprehensive reinforcement of Canada's presence, sovereignty and national security based on cooperation and interaction among several levels of government and numerous government departments, including National Defence, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canada Revenue Agency, and Indian and Northern Affairs. Interdepartmental simulations and exercises have also been carried out, such as Operation NANOOK in August 2007 and August 2008. These involve army, navy and air force personnel, as well as the Canadian Rangers and members of the RCMP, Coast Guard and various government departments, in simulated environmental spills, emergency ship evacuations and counter-narcotics operations.[12]

Finally, Canada's strategic interests in defending the northern frontier figured prominently when it exercised its sovereign authority and, on 5 May 2006, agreed with the United States to renew and extend indefinitely the North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) Command agreement, which includes the Arctic region.

In addition to these efforts, the Canadian government made other announcements in August 2008 relating to the protection of the Canadian North against possible threats. In particular, it will be mandatory rather than voluntary for foreign ships, including cruise ships, sailing into the Canadian Arctic to register with NORDREG, the Canadian Coast Guard agency that tracks vessels. Moreover, the jurisdictional limit of the *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act* will be extended from 100 nautical miles to 200 nautical miles (or 370 km).[13]

Conclusion

Security cannot be considered in isolation from other challenges and opportunities in the Arctic. Indeed, Arctic security and defence involve a range of issues and initiatives that make this an exceedingly complex policy area. Moreover, uncertainty regarding the precise nature of emerging threats increases the complexity of addressing contemporary Arctic security issues. As the role of the Arctic in Canada's security and defence unfolds, it is also clear that what is at stake will change. In this respect, while Arctic security and defence may be about Canadian territorial sovereignty, these issues are also increasingly about the people of the North. Canada's Arctic can be only as secure and free from threats as are its people.

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